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## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **Iron Sharpens Iron: Exploring the Experiences of Female College Student Leaders**

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**This qualitative study explored a small sample of female college students' perceptions of their experiences in leadership positions. Specifically the researcher examined the women's leadership styles and the factors that influenced how they lead. Additionally, the researcher focused on how gender may relate to the women's experiences. Basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative research methods were employed. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews, a focus group, and participant journals. Participants included four female students at a medium-sized, religiously affiliated private university who held significant leadership roles in student organizations. Results revealed that the participants employed either a relationship-oriented, task-oriented, or hybrid approach to leading. Additional themes emerged around influences on the women's approaches to leadership, with particular emphasis on the role of the larger environment in impacting students' leadership behaviors, and the role gender plays in their leadership experiences. This study can provide insight into the landscape of young women's leadership today and help begin to fill the research gap that currently exists about college student women holding formal leadership roles and how to support these leaders.**

**Key words:** women, gender, college students, leadership positions, leadership styles

## **Introduction**

As gender roles and expectations continue to gain attention in American society, there is an increased focus on both women's representation in leadership positions and their approaches to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007). While women's presence in the workforce, enrollment in higher education, and attainment of supervisory positions continue to dramatically increase, and in many cases exceed that of men, there is still a significant disparity between women and men holding top leadership positions that carry with them substantial authority (Eagly & Carli, 2004, 2007; Helfat, Harris, & Wolfson, 2006).

In addition to the disparity of the number of women in top leadership positions, there are a number of challenges that women face when in these roles. Research demonstrates that women in top leadership positions face challenges in balancing their preferred leadership styles with followers' expectations while in leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). While women's leadership styles and approaches tend to be more collaborative, participative, and democratic than the leadership styles of most men (Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Haber & Komives, 2009; Smith, 1997), women in

top leadership, particularly in male-dominated industries, can feel pulled to adopt more masculine, autocratic, and directive leadership styles (Eagly & Carli, 2004, 2007; Moran, 1992). This is a tricky double bind that women must face, as acting more assertive and directive is often met with resistance from both male and female colleagues; men, however, do not normally confront such resistance (Driskell, Olmstead, & Salas, 1993; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women leaders also face challenges in their roles with stereotyping, experiencing harassment, feeling excluded, and feeling alone and tokenized (Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 2003).

Although women face the challenges of under-representation in top leadership roles and must often confront and manage gender norms, expectations, and even harassment while in these roles, there is evidence that the playing field is gradually being leveled. Women are gaining access to and increasingly assuming top leadership roles (Helfat et al., 2006), just as men are assuming more domestic responsibilities (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009). Additionally, androgynous leadership styles that reflect a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics are more accepted and, even, valued than ever

before (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Northouse, 2007). Women's more democratic and transformational approaches to leadership have proven to be crucial to both organizational effectiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2004; Helgesen, 1990; Smith, 1997) and individual success (Heffernan, 2007). These steady changes could lead to an environment that is more open to women in top leadership roles and women's ways of leading.

One area that is under-researched but that could conceivably promote understanding of the future of women's leadership in society is the experience of college student women leaders. Examining the leadership styles and influences of these younger women may help us gain a greater understanding of women's leadership today and what we may expect in the future. The college environment provides many opportunities to be involved with different organizations and hold formal leadership roles in these organizations (Astin, 1997). Additionally, unlike the upper ranks of the business world, the college environment is a conceivably more empowering context for women leaders, particularly as women in higher education outnumber men.

The topic of female collegiate leaders is not completely uncharted territory, of course. Recent research shows that college women student leaders demonstrate greater competence and ability to engage in more democratic leadership (a form of leadership that is increasingly associated with organizational success) than men (Dugan, et al., 2008; Eagly & Carli, 2004; Haber & Komives, 2009; Helgesen, 1990; Shankman, Haber, Facca, & Allen, 2010; Smith, 1997), though men tend to have greater confidence and self-efficacy in their ability to lead (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). While the existing research sheds light on women's preferred leadership style and their relative confidence in their ability to lead, it does not focus specifically on college student women who hold formal leadership roles. There is a lack of information on how college women in leadership roles exercise leadership and the various factors, such as follower expectations and gender roles and norms, influence how they engage in leadership. A further examination of the leadership experiences of college women leaders can contribute to a better understanding of women's leadership today, with a particular focus on younger, college aged women. This information can also inform the ways in which college women leaders are supported and served on college campuses and how college student educators can help prepare these women for their leadership lives post-college.

### **The Study and its Methods**

In this study, I sought to understand the experiences of a small number of women leaders. Specifically, I examined college student women's leadership styles, the factors that influence the ways in which they lead, and what ways, if any, gender influences their leadership experiences. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative research methods were used; qualitative methods allow for studying social phenomena through the perspectives of the people who are being studied,

understanding in depth and in detail the potential complexity of one's experiences, and consideration of the larger context (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). In this study, the larger context was made up of the organizations, organizational members, and campus community in which the women led.

In this study, I employed basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative research methods, whereby "the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive" (Merriam, 2008, p. 6). This methodological approach encompasses characteristics of a number of more specific qualitative research methods. The methods of this study do not comfortably fit within one methodological approach and instead reflect and are informed by aspects a few different types of qualitative research such case study methodology (four specific cases of women's leadership experiences), ethnography (examining the culture and behaviors of women student leaders from their perspective), and phenomenology (gaining deeper understanding of the women leaders' experiences and the phenomena of college women's leadership) (Merriam, 2008; Patton, 2002). Although it was not the intention of this initial study, the findings may serve as preliminary work to be built upon and can lead to a more complete ethnographic study or a grounded theory.

The participants were four college student women who held significant leadership positions in different student organizations on a medium-sized, private, religiously affiliated university in the southwest United States. One woman was president of a sorority, one was captain of an athletic team, one was vice-president for a student government organization, and one was the president of a cultural organization. Two of these organizations (cultural organization and student government organization) were co-ed and two are all-women (sorority and athletic team). All four of the women were seniors. Two identified themselves as White, one identified as Asian-American, and one identified as Native Hawaiian. In addition to holding these formal leadership roles, each participant had taken at least one leadership course in college. The four participations were selected through purposeful, maximum-variation sampling; I identified them for the study based on my knowledge of the students and their prominent leadership roles on campus. The small number of participants and varied leadership experiences was intentional, with an effort to conduct "an in-depth, information-rich understanding" (Klenke, 2008, p. 10) of college women's leadership experiences.

Data were gathered in Fall 2009 through a demographic information sheet, open-ended qualitative interviews using the general interview guide approach, a focus group interview with three of the participants, and participant journaling. The interviewing and focus group protocols were validated through soliciting colleague review and feedback. Additionally, I

conducted a mock interview with a peer. This process led to reorganization and rephrasing of some of the questions. The one-on-one interview protocol included 10 questions that focused on the nature of the students' leadership experiences and the organizations in which they lead, their motivation for taking on their leadership roles, their goals for their position or organization, their approaches to leadership, how they interact with others in their group, how others react to their leadership, expectations that they face from others on how to lead, and messages they have heard growing up that have influenced their leadership (Appendix A). This initial interview purposefully did not include the variable of gender in the interview protocol until the last question, which focused on how, if at all, they felt gender norms or expectations have influenced the ways in which they exercise leadership. Leaving the topic of gender to the end of the interview allowed for gender to emerge if it was in fact an important factor for the participants.

The focus group interview examined the successes and challenges the women have faced in their roles and the perceived influence of gender on their leadership experiences and consisted of three main questions (Appendix B). Additionally, to help minimize researcher bias (I am an instructor of leadership and study women's leadership) and to triangulate the data, the focus group interview included a member check of the initial findings and the interview. The member check consisted of sharing of initial findings and supporting quotes from the one-on-one interviews. The participants discussed the findings and had the opportunity to add any additional information to the data that was presented. One of the women was unable to participate in the focus group interview and instead shared her experiences in a second follow-up interview.

The data collected from the interviews and focus group were triangulated with the participants' journals. These journals consisted of the participants' answers to six reflection questions that related to leading events or meetings in their organizations (Appendix C). The questions focused on expectations for the events or meetings and their experiences of the event or meeting after the fact. The participants completed the journal questions multiple times (ranging from two times to five times depending on how many meetings or events they led) during a three week period.

Interview and focus group tapes were transcribed by the researcher, and data were analyzed through content analysis procedures, leading to the identification of core patterns, themes, and categories through thematic and axial coding (Boyatzis, 1998; Klenke, 2008). The analysis included a focus on both the participant perspective (what the participants identified) and the researcher perspective (what is observed and concluded) as well as manifest and latent coding (Boyatzis, 1998). Initial coding categories were identified prior to the data collection and were revised after the initial data collection from the one-on-one interviews. Matrices were created and used for

capturing and examining quotes for the different themes and accompanied saliency of themes; matrices are helpful tools in organizing the data in way that can help identify themes and patterns that may not have otherwise been identified when examining cases or categories individually (Patton, 2002).

### **Findings**

This section discussed the key findings from the research with a focus on identified patterns and themes from the research and key quotes and examples where relevant. The findings related to the women's leadership approaches focused on relationship-oriented behaviors, task-oriented behaviors, balancing task and relationship-oriented behaviors, empowerment, and a feeling of responsibility to the members and the organization. Findings on the influences on the women's leadership approaches emphasized behaviors of past leaders in the organization, the larger organizational and environmental context, and messages they heard growing up.

Throughout the findings section names will be used to identify the four participants. The names used are fictional. Jessie, participant one, was Captain of an athletic team; Kara, participant two, was President of a cultural organization; Anna, participant three, was President of a sorority; and Christy, participant four, was Vice-President for a student government organization (see Table 2).

### **Leadership Approaches**

Each woman had her own unique leadership style and approach; some patterns of similarities emerged across the four women, and some key differences were also identified. The women's leadership styles reflected either relationship-oriented or task-oriented behaviors (or in some cases both), balancing relationship-oriented and task-oriented behaviors, empowerment, and responsibility to the members and organization (Table 1).

**Relationship and task-oriented behaviors.** Each of the four women identified the importance of focusing on the people and relationships in the organization and the tasks required within their roles in their organizations. Likely due in part to the students' familiarity with leadership through taking a leadership course, a few of the students actually used this language (relationships and tasks), and others used similar language, such as working with people and accomplishing goals.

The women described their leadership approaches and behaviors with varying degrees of focus on relationships and tasks. They each expressed at least some focus on both relationship and task in their preferred and more natural ways of leading as well as in the ways in which they led in their organizations. Two of the women were much more focused on relationships than tasks, one woman was heavily task-oriented, and one woman reflected more moderate levels of both task and relationship. Anna and Christy, while leading in their

organizations, felt a need to adopt slightly different behaviors than their more natural ways of leading, which is discussed in more depth later in this section. Table 2 provides a landscape of the women's approaches to leadership both in their natural inclination to lead and the ways in which they described how they led in the organizations.

**Relationship-oriented behaviors.** The category of relationship-oriented behaviors included the four sub-behaviors of: (a) providing support, building relationships, and bringing people together, (b) creating a positive mood and energy in the group, (c) avoiding conflict, and (d) de-emphasizing the position or role. Each sub-behavior is discussed in this section along with sample quotes from the participants.

Providing support to group members, building relationships, and bringing people together were prominent sub-behaviors within the relationship-oriented category and were emphasized by each of the women. Kara outreached to many first-year students who joined the group to help them feel comfortable and included. Similarly, Christy focused heavily on building relationships within the group: "I wanted to use my style to bring everyone together... so that they know they have a support system.... I tell them I am their support system."

There was also a strong focus on the importance of creating a positive and up-beat mood in the group. For example, Jessie recognized how the mood and energy on her team affected the team's cohesion and ability to perform: "[Part of my role is] having fun and putting smiles on people's faces and being very upbeat." Anna discussed that during her term as president of her sorority she adopted more relationship-focused behaviors such as promoting a positive energy in the group. In reflecting on a meeting in which she allowed the mood to lighten, she shared: "Everyone was laughing- it was just the complete mood of the whole room and we've never really had that before and that was just really interesting... Everyone felt really motivated and almost every person attended the next meeting." Anna recognized the benefits of having a positive mood in the group. Awareness of the mood in an organization and the importance of creating a positive mood were important for all four women, even for the women who tended to be more task-oriented.

The avoidance of conflict was also a prominent theme among the two women who were more relationship focused. Jessie avoided a member of her team when she had a conflict with her: "I am also a very unconflictual person- I just avoid it... it got to the point that I was pulling back from the team. Whenever I was around her I would get all this built up negative energy and I just would pull back." Kara shared: "I deal with [conflict or difficulties in the group] in certain ways that I just suck it up." Rather than holding her group members accountable, she avoided conflict by taking on additional responsibility herself within the organization. Kara eventually could not handle the additional pressure and responsibility and ended up resigning from her position of president during the

course of this study. Both Jessie and Kara recognized that avoiding conflict was not necessarily the best way to handle the situation, but they felt that they did not know what else to do.

The final sub-behavior that was prominent for the two women who were more relationship focused was de-emphasizing their position or role. This was particularly the case for Kara, who was in her second year of being president of her organization. For the second term Kara selected a co-president to lead with her (which was the first time this had been done in her organization) and encouraged the rest of the executive board to take on more prominent leadership roles. She shared her intention behind this: "I want them to know: yes, I am the president, but everyone has a role in this club and everyone is part of it... I just want everyone to be able to work together." Kara did not like the title of *President* and downplayed the role. People looked to her to tell them what to do, and she did not like this expectation or responsibility. Jessie did not de-emphasize her role as much as Kara did, but she did stress the desire to all work together, taking the full responsibility of the team off of her. She recognized that, regardless of role, everyone on the team could help by "cheering each other on, yelling each others' name, and feeding off of each others' positive energy." All four of the women stressed the importance of other leaders and roles within the organization, acknowledging that they cannot do it all on their own and wanting others to step up.

**Task-oriented behaviors.** The sub-behaviors associated with the *task-oriented behaviors* category were in many ways opposite of those sub-behaviors characteristic of the relationship-oriented behaviors category. In addition to reporting at least some focus on relationship-oriented behaviors, Anna and Christy stressed task-oriented behaviors in describing how they led in their organizations. The ways in which Jessie and Kara described their leadership approaches did not reflect any of the sub-behaviors of the task-oriented category. The category of task-oriented behaviors includes leading with a direct style, confronting conflict, and establishing boundaries for their role. These themes are presented below with sample participant quotes.

Anna's leadership approach was naturally more direct than the other participants, and she was aware of her approach and the potential downfalls of this approach when leading women:

I am very direct. I take feedback well and expect people to tell me what they like and what they don't like, so that is the approach I use with others and that didn't work with everyone... That was my biggest concern in leading a group of women because I feel I almost have a more masculine side of leading, where I am direct and tell how it is, and basically women don't respond to that approach [very well].

She recognized throughout her term that she needed to buffer her leadership style in ways that she was not as direct. While Anna believed that the women in her sorority tended to dislike her style, she felt that they appreciated it when she was operating in a direct manner when representing the sorority to external groups and was standing up for the chapter.

Christy's preferred way of leading was not as direct as Anna's, but she did feel the need to adopt more direct leadership approaches when leading her student government board. She viewed being direct as being honest and open: "It doesn't help to try to hide the truth with glitter and sparkles- when you tell the truth you are more appreciated for it than hiding part of the truth." Throughout her term she gradually shifted her style to focus more on holding people accountable, setting expectations, and establishing additional structure within the organization.

In contrast to Kara and Jessie's intentional avoidance of conflict, both Anna and Christy were comfortable confronting conflict. Upon recognizing that her board was getting out of hand during the meetings and not following through with responsibilities, Christy confronted the group at a meeting. She explained how she approached the situation: "I calmly and rationally told them that I'm their supervisor that they need to update me... I tried to express how bad it makes me look because I'm just trying to help them." As the semester progressed she became more direct in her meetings with the members to tell them when they were not meeting expectations. Anna confronted conflict both within the chapter in holding her members accountable and outside of the chapter when confronting others. She shared a situation in which a fraternity was acting inappropriately to a member of her organization and how she responded: "One girl was really humiliated by a fraternity and I went into the chapter meeting and approached their entire chapter...People were really happy that I could confront other people if there was something going on." Both Christy and Anna recognized that confronting conflict was important for their effectiveness in their roles and for the success of their organizations.

Another prominent behavior prevalent for the two women with more task-oriented styles was establishing and maintaining boundaries around their roles. Both Anna and Christy identified that they must behave in a certain way when in their leadership role and created professional distance between themselves and their members. Anna was intentional about the type of president she wanted to be in her sorority and was very aware of her boundaries when she was in the president role: "When I am in the role of chapter president I need to be in that in-the-box, authority, mature, professional role, but if we're just out to dinner with friends I can loosen up a little and have fun." When conducting one-on-one meetings with the members of her organization, Christy also set boundaries; she determined what types of conversations should take place in the meetings, placing a greater emphasis on her role of supervisor rather than friend. In particular, she wanted to keep the focus on the roles

and responsibilities of her supervisees and described her boundaries on what was to be discussed in one-on-one meetings "when they ask me about how I'm doing, I say, not it's not about me, it's about you... we can talk after the meeting, but right now it's not about me, it's about you." Both Anna and Christy recognized that there was a time and place for focusing on tasks, primarily when they were operating within their role of leader in the organization.

***Additional approaches.*** In addition to the relationship-oriented and task-oriented behaviors discussed above, additional approaches to leadership emerged. Each of the women demonstrated evidence of balancing task and relationship, valuing and promoting empowerment, and having a sense of responsibility to others and the organization. These themes are presented below along with sample quotes from the participants that reflect the themes.

Although the women tended to be more focused on relationship or more focused on task, they each stressed the importance of having a balance of the two. The women agreed that while relationships and tasks were both important, building relationships and cohesion in a group was the most important. Without strong relationships, nothing would get done and the experience would not be very meaningful. Jessie noted: "We do have [things to do]... but we can't even get there if we don't have cohesion on our team." Anna stressed the importance of balancing relationship and task: "I always try to find a good balance between work and play, [it is] good to not only focus on business every week- we try to mix in fun." Each of the women struggled in balancing relationships and tasks, as there were downfalls to focusing too much on one or the other.

Regardless of leadership orientation, each of the women stressed the importance of empowering the members of their organizations and felt it was their responsibility to do so. Kara shared that she was good at identifying things that people may be good at and finding opportunities for people to lead within the organization and noted: "People have thanked me for giving them the opportunity to step up when they don't have the courage to take initiative themselves." Anna's approach to empowerment revolved more around shared decision making within the organization, recognizing that "[the members] would have more trust in us and ownership in the whole organization if they knew what was going on or have a say in a decision." At times, Anna would bring a decision to the whole chapter, even when it could have been decided by her or by the executive board. The focus on empowering group members relates to the last finding identified for this research question: a sense responsibility to the members and the organization.

The women felt a responsibility for their members, the organization, or in one case, the student body. This was a motivating factor for each of the women in assuming their leadership roles and an influence in how they chose to lead. Christy wanted to give back to the university:

I wanted to serve the student body and make them feel satisfied with the events on campus. When I was a freshman I experienced a lot of student apathy, so I thought my senior year would be a great time to really influence that uplifting school spirit.

One reason why Anna decided to run for president was that she did not have enough trust in other members of her organization to lead the organization in the direction where she felt it needed to go. Kara was motivated to help build a welcoming community for members of her cultural group on campus, and she wanted to strengthen the organization and help move it in a positive direction. Jessie assumed her leadership role in part to serve as a big sister and support for the younger women on her team. She also stressed that it was important for her to instill a sense of responsibility in every member of the organization for the success of the team. She called this *iron sharpens iron*, whereby “each player on our team is the iron.... in order for us to get stronger, we have to sharpen each other, we have to feed off of each others’ power to get to the next point.” While there was some sign of individual motivation to gain leadership experience in two of the women, the primary focus and motivation for the women was serving the organization and members of the organization or campus community.

### Leadership Influences

The women’s responses to questions about what has influenced how they lead can be categorized in three ways. These three categories are: (a) behaviors of past leaders in the organization, (b) organizational and environmental context, and (c) messages they heard growing up. Each category is explained with examples below.

**Behaviors of past leaders.** For each of the women, experiencing the leadership behaviors of the former leaders in their organizations was both a motivation for taking on their leadership role and an influence on how the women chose to lead. In each case, the women felt a need to purposefully lead differently than past leaders. Three of the women wanted to lead in a more relationship-oriented way than their predecessors and wanted to help create a more positive mood in the group. Kara, Jessie, and Christie discussed wanting to create a more friendly and upbeat atmosphere in the group, reflecting on negative experiences and feeling from their organizations in past years. Kara shared: “I didn’t agree with how [past leaders] did things. There was a negative feeling when people walked into the meeting, so I wanted to bring a positive feeling into the club.” Anna, on the other hand, wanted to portray a more professional and mature image in the role of president than the past president: “I didn’t want to be the president that took shots with new members [like I’d seen before]- that’s not the leadership I wanted to portray.”

Two of the women who wanted a more positive feeling in their group said that looking back now at their organization since they have assumed the leader role, they see positives in the

ways that their more task-oriented predecessors led. Jessie shared that the strict focus of the past captain was actually helpful in getting people to follow through and take the role seriously, but she did not appreciate that it caused discomfort and a lack of approachability. Similarly, Kara said:

I had seen past presidents and way they had run things. I didn’t agree with how they did things- there was a negative feeling when people walked into the meeting, so I wanted to bring a positive feeling into the club...Now I think I need to be more like them [because they set expectations and people followed through and listened to them].

In these two cases, Jessie and Kara recognized the downfalls on being too focused on relationships and neglecting to set clear guidelines.

**Organizational and environmental context.** The larger organizational and environmental context also influenced how the women led. The two main aspects of an organization that influenced how women led were the gender make-up of the group and the structure and purpose of the group. During the focus group interview, the three women discussed how the gender makeup of the group influences how they would interact with members in their organization. The two women who led all-women groups felt like they could interact with all of their members similarly, while the woman who led the co-ed group shared that she noticed that she interacted with her male and female group members differently, often being more direct with the men than with the women. In discussing how she handled similar situations with men and women she explained:

[With the female director] I don’t want there to be tension because I am kind of upset at her, but for the male director... who did something too that wasn’t very protocol and unprofessional... I had no problem telling him how it went. For the female director it took a couple one-on-ones to kind of ease her into it where as with the male I told him in two minutes.

The structure and purpose of the organization was also a prominent influence in how the women led. Anna stressed this when sharing the formal structure and rules that she had to follow based on the national organization requirements. The formal structure of the meeting influenced her leadership style; it also influenced Anna to be more focused on being friendly and approachable outside of the meetings, particularly because she was leading an all-women organization. Anna explained:

In formal meeting – no one in the meeting can talk unless I call on them and people have to address me a certain way in the meeting...there is no eating or drinking and no chitter chatter. If there is I have to bang my gavel on the table and people have to shut up... It is really really formal, and I think it does come

from the structure of the organization.... I do feel in my role I have to be much more task-oriented and there is no room for relationship [building] when people aren't allowed to talk.

Anna continued to share that she needed to be particularly friendly in leading women. The structure of the organization, her formal role, and the gender makeup of the organization influenced how Anna led. Christy also felt that the very structured nature of her organization and the nature of the event-planning aspects of her board required a greater focus on managing tasks and making sure things were getting done. Knowing that the organization tended to be more task-focused, she felt a need to bring a more personable and relational focus to the organization.

In addition to the nature of the specific organizations, there was also evidence that other environmental factors influenced the way they lead. Two of the women felt that their group and team environments growing up influenced their styles. Anna's family is mostly men and she felt this influenced her direct leadership style. In playing sports throughout her life, Jessie did not have many group experiences with boys or men; she felt this influenced her more relationship-orientated style. During the focus group interview the three women agreed that being on a campus with a majority female population supported their presence in these top leadership roles.

**Messages from the past.** The women identified messages they heard growing up that they felt influenced the way they lead. Many of these messages had to do with the importance of serving and including other people. For example, Anna constantly heard message growing up to make sure everyone is included and others' opinions and ideas are heard. She recalled one of these messages: "you have to be inclusive, everyone needs to be inclusive...even being captain of a dance team, you needed to make sure everyone is on the same page [and] you need to be inclusive and open to all opinions and ideas." Kara remembered from her childhood her mother sharing: "Everything starts in the home. If you have peace at home you can take that peace out with you and share it with others and serve others." The women were socialized to embrace, serve, and include others in their lives and groups.

The women also heard messages about qualities they should encompass as a person or leader. Jessie heard messages growing up about being focused and responsible, particularly as it related to her participation in athletics. She felt this led her to set high standards for herself. She also recalled the message: "Be myself and lead with whatever ways come natural to me." Anna learned a lot from her mother on what type of person and leader she should be: "You have to be able to stand up for yourself...[I think this] came from the fact that my parents were divorced and I did need to stand up for myself- even to my parents." Jessie heard messages about being true to herself when she is leading, emphasizing morals and values. Kara

heard messages about realizing and respecting her limits as a leader, recognizing that she can only do so much. Many of the messages the women heard affirmed who they were as leaders and people.

### **Perceptions about the Impact of Gender**

Three of the women indicated that they felt gender influenced their leadership experiences. While they agreed that gender played a role in their leadership experiences, they felt it was just one of many factors and was not an overwhelmingly salient factor. One woman did not feel that gender was a significant factor in her experiences. She felt that the members of the organization had the same expectations of her and her co-president, and said: "I don't feel I'm expected to lead in a certain way because I'm a woman in my club." She thought that gender could influence leadership, but she did not personally feel that it had.

During the one-on-one interviews, gender purposefully was not included in the interview protocol until near the end to see if the variable of gender would emerge on its own. The two women who led in co-ed groups did not mention gender in their responses until prompted, and the two women in all-women groups did discuss their gender and the gender makeup of the group when answering some of the questions. During the focus group interview, the three women who attended discussed gender and identified ways in which they felt gender mattered in their leadership experiences and perceptions of leadership.

The ways in which the three women felt that gender did matter fell into three categories: (a) it is different leading men and women, (b) in some cases they are treated differently because they are women, and (c) they lead differently than men would in their role. The women shared some of their own lived experiences as well as their beliefs and opinions about how they think gender matters. For example, Anna and Jessie, who both led all-women groups, believed that they would lead the group differently if it were co-ed. Anna discussed how leading a co-ed group would be different: "I think my leadership experiences could have been different if I was working with men and women...our experiences are a lot different working only with women...my styles would be so different." While these beliefs are not concrete evidence, there is something to be gained from examining these assumptions.

Jessie, Christy, and Anna all believed that they either *do* use different approaches when leading men or women or *would* if they also led men (for the women in all-women groups). Christy shared a realization in the interview:

I actually didn't really realize this until now but I actually do [lead men and women differently]. I try to direct females a different way... with males, I know that they are very task-oriented, so if I tell them to do it then they'll do it. But for females, one of the questions I ask them is 'how are you doing? How are

things going school wise?’ I have to find a balance - it’s a struggle with the female directors to give them more task orientation.

Christy recognized that she was more direct and matter-of-fact with the men in her organization and tends to focus more on relationships and being nice with the women in her group. Anna shared a similar feeling:

I wouldn’t say I buffer my leadership style at all around men, if anything I’d say I am more direct...Being a leader of women it is just hard to have that direct style of leadership and [you want] to get things done and accomplished but then it’s 100 women so I’ve had to be a lot more relationship-oriented than I’ve wanted to be. I never anticipated trying to spend so much time just sitting and talking to people and letting them vent all of their problems

The three women also felt that in some cases they were treated differently or viewed differently than men in similar roles. Jessie experienced double standards with gender in athletics and thought that because she is a woman she is not taken as seriously. She felt that there is an expectation that men work and women are at home, which negatively affects her role as an athlete and therefore diminishes her credibility as a leader on a women’s athletic team. Christy felt very well respected as the leader of her board but felt less so when serving on the executive board of the organization with her peers of similar rank. Within the executive board she felt that there were struggles around authority and power and felt like she was treated differently because she was a woman. She explained:

There have been moments where I do feel like I’m being treated differently because of gender....like for instance we’re in exec meeting the males ask mostly each other for advice. I don’t think it’s intentional but it may be out of their comfort zone, so they ask the other males.

Christy also felt that the president treated her differently and unfairly. In an executive board meeting the president she felt attacked and felt that the fact that she was a woman influenced how he treated her:

I don’t see him reacting that way to men in the group... He can be kind of bossy [and] he likes to be sarcastic but it comes across as demeaning....he started acting like that to me and that’s when I snapped back and said, ‘not I’m not going to let you talk to me like this.’

In contrast, Anna and Jessie felt that often it is the women in a group who are less supportive of their leadership roles. Anna experienced this through an internship with a corporation; she felt women were jealous and treated her differently when she

received a promotion while the men were supportive and congratulatory.

A final way in which the three women believed gender mattered was their perceptions that they lead differently than men. The women felt that men are more direct, matter-of-fact, and no-nonsense in the way that they lead. Jessie felt that the way she leads is “more loving, comforting, and relationship [oriented]” than how she imagines the captain of the men’s team would lead, which is in “a more black and white way.” Christy experienced men as more transactional, avoiding emotions and grudges.

The one woman who could not attend the focus group interview, Kara, answered questions related to gender in the follow-up interview and had different perceptions of the role of gender than the other three women. She did not feel that gender was an important factor in her leadership experiences. She did not feel that she was expected to lead in a certain way because she is a woman, and she also did not believe she led men and women differently. The only way in which she believed gender mattered was in thinking that people are supportive of her role as president of a cultural organization because people view clubs as “fun things.” She felt people assumed that because she was a woman it made sense that she planned the fun activities while her male executive members would do the “other work.” Kara shared that she has heard and knows that women are not treated equally in society. She said: “I don’t know if it’s just me or I’m naïve, and I guess [discrimination or differing expectations] exists but I haven’t really experienced it and I’m not going to let that bring me down.” She also recognized that the ways she leads does not challenge the gender norms since she leads with a feminine style.

In addition to Kara’s uncertainty about whether gender matters, the other women shared that there were other factors that influenced their leadership that could be misconstrued as being related to gender. For example, Christy believed that it was not solely gender that influenced how she led: “I’m wondering if it’s more personality based than gender based – I mean it’s just a combination, I don’t think it’s solely gender.” Similarly, Anna shared that age, along with being a woman, could influence the way she was treated in her internship. They viewed gender as one aspect of self that likely interacts with their personality or other identities.

The variable of the larger environment was recognized in determining if gender plays a role in the women’s leadership experiences. The gender makeup of the group clearly influenced the way in which Anna, Christy, and Jessie led. Anna and Jessie felt that they were supported in their leadership roles because the group was all women and the leader of their organization therefore must be a woman. Anna jokingly shared: “I can’t be discriminated against for being a woman because I have to be a woman [as president of a sorority].”



Beyond this, though, was the context of the campus environment. All of the women, including Kara, felt that the campus was a welcoming and supportive environment for female leaders. They all felt that leading in the “real world” would be different and that they would face more difficulties. Christy experienced the college environment as more “feminist...in college it’s more equal and a more accepting environment for women. In the real world I think there is still a little bit of discrimination. I think college allows for that more accepting environment for all men and women.” Anna experienced this first-hand through her internship, recognizing that the college environment was more female-friendly. Similarly, Kara shared that she thinks that in the “real world” gender norms will be pushed more since it is a more formal setting.

### Discussion

The discussion of the findings of this study is presented below. The discussion is arranged around the three main categories of findings. First, the findings about the leadership approaches and behaviors are discussed. Next, influences on leadership are discussed. Last, findings on role of gender are discussed.

#### Leadership Approaches and Behaviors

It is clear that the women in this study felt that focusing on relationships and the members of the group is very important in their approach to leadership; they also agreed that building and maintaining positive relationships in the group was crucial for the success of their organizations. The women stressed the importance of the success of the group (rather than individual success), empowering group members, and making the organization better now and in the future. It was clear that to these women, leadership means something beyond oneself. This served as a motivation for their leadership practice and helped them feel a sense of purpose in their work. The women recognized ways in which they were socialized to live and lead in ways that reflect these assumptions about leadership.

These findings on a focus on relationships and embracing a group focus when leading are consistent with research on older women’s leadership styles (Eagly & Carli, 2004, 2007; Smith, 1997). The findings from this study also add additional depth to the quantitative research on college women’s leadership styles, which have indicated that college women employ relational leadership approaches significantly more often than men (Dugan et al. 2008; Haber & Komives, 2009; Shankman et al., 2010). Although this current study does not compare the women leaders’ approaches to leadership to that of men, it supports the plethora of research on women in the *real world* and in college, which suggests that women’s approaches to leadership reflect relational and group-oriented behaviors.

With this being said, along with this value of relationships and the group, there was additional evidence that adopting task-oriented behaviors as important and necessary for leading in college organizations. Two of the women exhibited these task-oriented behaviors alongside relationship-oriented behaviors,

while the two women who were more relationship-oriented struggled in their ability to influence their organization and maintaining respect from their members, which led to recognizing that they needed to do a better job in confronting conflict and holding people accountable. This focus on also employing task-oriented behaviors reflects the research on the benefits of androgynous leadership and the movement in the literature toward more androgynous leadership behaviors embraced by many women (Eagly & Carli, 2004, 2007; Northouse, 2007); two of the women seemed to have embraced this balance of relationships and tasks, while the other two recognized the need and desire to do this. The four women all agreed that there needed to be a healthy balance of relationships and tasks in order to be effective and that there were dangers in leading with too much of a focus on relationship or too much of a focus on task.

Androgynous leadership approaches are associated with greater leadership effectiveness and promoted within the field of leadership and organizational effectiveness, particularly for women in the *real world* (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2004; Park, 1997). This focus on androgynous leadership is too supported and recognized by the college women leaders in this study. This consistent theme supports the further promotion of androgynous leadership for both women and men and continued research into the effectiveness and use of androgynous approaches to leadership.

The framework of how the women in this study led (see Table 1) adds to the literature on how women engage in leadership. The framework presents specific behaviors and approaches that the college women engaged in while leading in their organizations and captures the relationship and task-oriented behaviors and the need to balance those behaviors. Using this framework to examine women’s leadership approaches in other environments outside of the college environment could provide additional insight to women’s leadership approaches.

#### Influences on Leadership

In examining the influences on women’s leadership approaches, there was evidence of expressed intentionality in the way that they led based on what they learned through experience. The ways in which they led were purposefully influenced by the way other people have led in the past and their assessment on how effective their predecessors’ leadership approaches were in leading their groups. The organizations in which the women led and the larger environment in which their organization was situated also influenced the way in which gender played out in their experiences and how they approached leadership. This finding adds to the literature on how the organization and larger context can influence one’s natural ways of leading.

Past research indicated that women in top leadership roles and women working in more male-dominated industries can feel the need to adopt more masculine and autocratic leadership styles

(Eagly & Carli, 2004, 2007; Moran, 1992). This influence was also present for the women in this study. One of the women, Christy, adopted more task-oriented behaviors in meetings and when working one-on-one with men because she found that this led to greater effectiveness for the organization and for her role. Kara and Jessie both recognized the value of embracing more autocratic leadership styles in their organizations, particularly when reflecting on their predecessors' styles, but did not themselves embrace them. Interestingly, Anna, who had a more inherent task-oriented approach to leadership, felt the need to try to adopt more feminine and democratic approaches in her female-dominated organization in order to successfully lead in the organization. These findings suggest that the larger organizational context can influence college women's leadership approaches and that the women are aware of this. Additional research on the role of the organizational context on women's leadership approaches (beyond the college environment) could contribute to a greater understanding of this concept.

In addition to recognizing how their organization influenced their leadership approaches, the women also identified that larger campus environment played a role in their leadership experience. They felt that their experiences of leading on a college campus are different than they would be in the *real world*, noting that the college campus was a more inclusive and female-friendly environment. It would be interesting to examine more directly women's experiences leading in these different environments. This could be done through case studies of women leading in different environments, cross sectional design studies, and/or longitudinal research and could shed light onto not only the role of the larger environment, but also gender and potential generational differences in women's leadership.

Having a clearer understanding of how women's leadership experiences differ across multiple contexts could provide valuable insight to college student educators in how they can prepare college women for life after college, not only in leadership positions but also in the workforce as a whole. While the women in this study felt that their experiences would differ post-college they did not seem to have given it much consideration. Additional insight could be useful in preparing the women more intentionally for leadership outside of the collegiate context. Research on women's experiences in college and after could also be valuable for organizations wishing to recruit and develop women leaders. An understanding of how the environment influences their experience could lead to better retention, development, and performance.

### **Role of Gender**

While three of the four women identified that they felt gender was a significant factor in their leadership experiences, the role of gender did not appear to be as salient for these women as it appears to be in research on older women in the larger society (Eagly & Carli, 2004, 2007). There was some evidence of being

treated differently, being left out, and feeling lonely by Christy, which is evident in Edmonson Bell and Nkomo's (2003) research on women in top leadership roles. For the most part, though, the women felt empowered and supported in their roles within their organizations and on the college campus. It is important to recognize that two of the organizations in which the women led were all-women organizations and were fairly social in nature.

An interesting finding emerged on how gender interacts with leadership for two of the women. They felt like they could be more direct with men than with women without resistance. This is contrary to the idea that men may not react well to women's more direct styles (Driskell, Olmstead, & Salas, 1993; Eagly & Carli, 2007) and supports the research that when adopting more direct styles women face resistance from other women (Driskell et al.; Eagly & Carli). Follower supportiveness from men and women is a concept worth further exploration in college women and older women. As more women continue to enter top leadership roles (Eagly & Carli) the perceptions of women in these roles may be shifting; this could be particularly the case on college campuses which ultimately could lead to a cultural shift in the greater society and the men and women in these organizations enter the *real world*. This potential shift is not only relevant for women in these roles, but also for men and women in organizations who may be interacting with women in top roles on college campuses and in the larger society.

As college campuses continue to become more female dominated (Eagly & Carli, 2007), it would be interesting to examine the leadership experiences of men on college campuses. A study similar to this one with men in various top leadership roles on college campuses could provide additional insight into the experience of holding a formal leadership role, could suggest possible ways in which men and women experience the leadership roles similarly and differently, and contribute to a better understanding of the role of the college environment on student leadership experiences for men and women. Additionally, it would be interesting to see how college men are engaging in leadership and if they, too, reflect a trend toward embracing more androgynous approaches. If an ultimate goal is advancing women in leadership roles consideration must, too, be paid to the leadership approaches of men in which they will be working, interacting, and leading.

### **Conclusion**

Jessie's metaphor of *iron sharpens iron* provides an important perspective on women's leadership: the role of others. Whether it is including others in their approaches to leadership, learning from others, or recognizing how other people influence how they lead, it is undeniable that the women in this study see leadership as more than just a role. Leadership is an activity, a relationship, and a process one undertakes with others. It also, though, includes a focus on tasks and the challenge of balancing of these approaches was instrumental in the women's leadership effectiveness.

While there is much to be speculated from this study as to if and how gender interacts with leadership, the study does suggest that gender did play a role in the women's leadership experiences. The women in the study did not feel that they were ultimately disadvantaged in their experiences on campus, but it is unclear what their experiences will be like in the *real world*. Additional research is needed to understand the experiences of younger women in the workforce and the transition of women leaders from college into the work force and later into leadership roles. This information along with an examination of men in similar roles could lead to a better understanding of if and how the gender playing field is being leveled. The women in the study did not feel that they were ultimately disadvantaged in their experiences on campus, but it is unclear what their experiences will be like in the *real world*. Additional research is needed to understand the experiences of younger women in the workforce and the transition of women leaders from college into the work force and later into leadership roles.

In this study I sought to explore the leadership experiences of college student women in holding formal leadership roles in college organizations. Findings from this study provide additional insight into the complex ways in which college women approach leadership while in leadership positions and the roles that past leaders, the organization and greater environment, messages, and gender play in influencing the women's approaches to leadership.

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Table 1.

*Leadership Approaches*

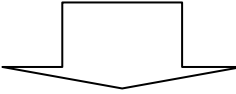
Relationship-Oriented Behaviors	Task-Oriented Behaviors
Provide support, build relationships, bring people together Create positive mood and energy in group Avoid conflict De-emphasize position/ role	Lead with direct style Confront conflict Establish boundaries within the role
	
Balancing Relationship-Oriented and Task-Oriented Behaviors	
Empowerment	
Responsibility to the Members & Organization	

Table 2.

*Participant Organizations and Styles*

Participant	Organizational Type	Relationship- Orientation (personal) <sup>1</sup>	Task- Orientation (personal) <sup>1</sup>	Relationship- Orientation (in org) <sup>1</sup>	Task- Orientation (in org) <sup>1</sup>
Jessie	Athletic (All-women)	High	Low	High	Low
Kara	Cultural (Co-ed)	High	Low	High	Low
Anna	Greek (All-women)	Low	High	Moderate	Moderate
Christy	Governance( Co-ed)	Moderate to High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate to High

<sup>1</sup> options are none, low, moderate, and high and were assigned by the researcher

## **Appendix A**

### **One-On-One Interview Guide**

1. Describe the organizations that you are or have been involved with and any formal leadership roles you now hold or have held in these organizations.
2. Tell me a bit more about your position of <name of position> in <name of organization>.
3. Why did you pursue this position? (if not covered in Q2)
4. What have been/ are some of your goals for the positions you currently hold or have held and for the organization more generally?
5. Please describe the leadership approaches, strategies, or tactics you tried that have worked. Describe those that have not worked.
6. Please describe the ways in which you interact with the members in your group.
7. How do people react to your leadership?
8. Do you believe people have certain expectations of you as a leader? Please explain. How have these expectations influenced the way you lead?
9. What messages have you heard in your life on how you should act or lead, and how do you believe this has influenced you in your role?
10. Based on what you have shared thus far, do you believe gender norms or expectations have played a role in how you exercise leadership? Please explain why or why not. (ask if gender has not come up at all)

## **Appendix B**

### **Focus Group Interview Guide**

Welcome students and ask them to briefly introduce themselves and briefly share what organizations they are involved with and what leadership roles they hold. Share that the purpose of this focus group interview is to discuss successes and challenges faced in their leadership roles, and encourage them to refer to their journaling notes if it would be helpful. The second purpose of the time together is for me to share initial findings from the individual interviews to get their perspectives and feedback.

1. Think about the leadership roles you hold or have held in organizations- and describe the successes you have experiences.
2. What challenges have you faced in your organizations? In working with your organizational members?
3. In what ways, if any do you believe gender has influenced your successes and challenges?

I will share the initial findings, including themes and supporting data and quotes, from the interviews. I will provide a handout that includes these findings. I will walk through the findings so far and ask them to comment on the findings. I will specifically ask:

1. Which findings or quotes do you particularly agree with?
2. Which findings or quotes do you particularly disagree with?
3. Do you have anything to add to any of the findings or quotes that I've presented?

I will end the focus group interview by asking if there is anything else they would like to add about anything we have discussed today.

## **Appendix C**

### **Journaling Questions**

Over the next 2 or 3 weeks please take approximately 10-15 minutes before and after each event or meeting that you are leading to answer the following questions.

#### **Before an event or meeting:**

1. What are your expectations for this event or meeting? How do you plan to approach this?

#### **After an event or meeting:**

1. My experience in leading this event or meeting was:
2. What went well about this event or meeting? (think about your leadership roles and styles, intentions, goals, interactions with other people, etc.)
3. This event or meeting went well because:
4. What challenges did I face in this event or meeting? (think about your leadership roles and styles, intentions, goals, interactions with other people, etc.)
5. These challenges arose because: